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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002844

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/01/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [KDEM](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: ROBERT GHANEM SETS HIS SIGHTS ON BAABDA
PALACE

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) During an expansive luncheon with the Ambassador, poloff, and pol FSN on August 29, West Biqa' MP Robert Ghanem said that there needs to be better coordination of the reconstruction effort and recommended establishing an umbrella organization to oversee the effort. Ghanem (who, as with most Maronites, entertains presidential ambitions) says it is time to remove President Lahoud and suggests Speaker Nabih Berri can be won over to the cause with the right combination of money and influence. Michel Aoun is an unlikely candidate to replace Lahoud as he has lost nearly a quarter of his support among the Christian community over his pro-Hizballah stance. Ghanem added there are rumors that Hizballah and Syria will begin acting against March 14 MPs, perhaps even targetting some for assassination. Hailing from a diverse region of Lebanon, Ghanem believes there is some frustration with Hizballah among the Shi'a, and that by removing cards such as the Sheba'a Farms, the Lebanese can ultimately get the group to disarm. Ghanem also suggested there should be a plan in place for disarming the Palestinian militias. END SUMMARY.

NEED FOR COORDINATION OF RECONSTRUCTION

¶2. (C) Concerned that the reconstruction effort has gotten off to a slow start, Ghanem said that the main issue is a lack of coordination, so that there are hundreds of rebuilding initiatives but no central authority tying these together (Comment. We have experienced this phenomenon, whereby one Ministry tells us one thing, and then another Ministry contradicts this. End Comment). Ghanem suggested either giving this coordinative role to the Hariri-controlled the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) or create a new "National Authority" to oversee the rebuilding effort. This authority, which would include professionals such as engineers, auditors and surveyors, would be responsible for overall planning and strategizing for reconstruction and would disburse money for specific projects to ministries and organizations. Ghanem said he has presented his idea to Siniora, who was non-committal.

TIME FOR LAHOUD TO GO

¶3. (C) Ghanem believes it is time to get rid of Emile Lahoud -- "that will solve 75 percent of our problems." The LAF, according to Ghanem, is still predominantly Shi'a and pro-Syrian. To change the army, argues Ghanem, the Lebanese must first change the President. He also believes Lahoud must have known that thousands of rockets were smuggled into Lebanon from Syria over the years, and Ghanem charged that Lahoud is culpable of "high treason" for his role in allowing this build-up to take place. Similarly, the head of the airport, Wafiq Shukair, a known Hizballah sympathizer, should have been removed at least two years ago, but Lahoud has kept him in place (though Shukair has been sidelined by recent changes in airport security).

¶4. (C) Ghanem acknowledged that the key to Lahoud's removal is the as yet unsupportive Nabih Berri, but that if "we give him what he wants", Berri might be tempted to swing his parliamentary bloc against Lahoud. Berri must realize that his position vis-a-vis deciding the next President is stronger now than it will be a year from now, when Lahoud is due to step down anyway. Though Berri would prefer former Foreign Minister Jean Obeid as the next President, an unacceptable choice for the March 14 group, he would be prepared to accept two or three compromise candidates. "I know my name would be one of those Berri would support," stumped Ghanem, who is not a full-fledged March 14 member (having not been part of the movement at the beginning), though is not pro-Syrian either.

¶5. (C) What would swing Berri against Lahoud? "Power," replied Ghanem, "Involve Nabih, more and more. Give him primacy over Hizballah." Ghanem suggested diverting

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reconstruction funds to Berri's Council for the South and also expanding the Cabinet to allow Amal to have four ministers (rather than the current three). Ghanem does not think that, if approached by the March 14 group about removing Lahoud, Berri would automatically go running to the Syrians to denounce the plot and proclaim his fealty since Syria is no longer the power it once was in Lebanon. Ghanem believes though that the March 14 group should wait to proposition Berri until after the next Brammertz report, especially if it implicates Syria even further. Ghanem said that Berri and Siniora have developed a good working partnership throughout the recent crisis, which will help in working out a solution for Lahoud.

WHITHER THE GENERAL?

¶6. (C) Ghanem does not believe Aoun will be a credible candidate for President and doubts whether Hizballah truly wants him to occupy Baabda palace. Furthermore, Aoun's support among Christians is drying up; he has lost nearly a quarter of his supporters, according to Ghanem, since he signed his pact with Hizballah in February 2006. Of these, about one-third have moved into Samir Ja'ja's camp, while the rest remain adrift. Ghanem estimates that right now one-third of Christians are with Aoun, one-third are with the March 14 movement politicians, and one-third are non-affiliated.

A MOVE AGAINST MARCH 14

¶7. (C) Ghanem says there are rumors that the Syrians plan to act against the March 14 movement and that Hizballah will try to kill three or four March 14 deputies in the hopes of causing the GOL to topple. Other pro-Syrians -- Ghanem mentioned Elie Ferzli and Omar Karamah in specific -- will support this move so as to deflect attention from the investigation into Rafiq Hariri's assassination. "They want to create a vacuum because they are afraid of Brammertz,"

Ghanem claimed.

GETTING HIZBALLAH TO DISARM

18. (C) According to Ghanem, who hails from an area of Lebanon which he describes as a "microcosm of Lebanon" due to its diversity (Note. West Biqa' has 2 Sunni MPs, 1 Greek Orthodox, 1 Maronite, 1 Druze, and 1 Shi'ite. End Note), he has sensed a certain amount of Shi'a displeasure with Hizballah following the conflict with Israel. After an initial period of jubilation, average Shi'a will begin to ask themselves whether it was worth it just to poke Israel in the eye. Ghanem claims that Hizballah, realizing this, is in full damage control mode and is directing its propaganda machine primarily towards shoring up its own base. Ghanem also believes Hizballah has recoiled from Syria following Bashar's over-the-top August 15 speech.

19. (C) In terms of disarming Hizballah, Ghanem unsurprisingly holds that resolving the Sheba'a Farms question is the key. "Look, we know Sheba'a is nothing," Ghanem admitted, "but we need to take all the cards from Hizballah's hands, and then corner them." Arguing that Hizballah can't be forcibly disarmed, Ghanem thinks that the Sheba'a Farms should be put under UN trusteeship. With this, as well as a prisoner exchange, Ghanem believes that the GOL can put sufficient pressure on Hizballah to get the group to hand its weapons over to the LAF,

DON'T FORGET THE PALESTINIANS

10. (C) One should also keep in mind the need to disarm Palestinian militant groups in Lebanon, remarked Ghanem. While he understands the difficulty in flushing out weapons from the large, ungovernable Palestinian refugee camps, Ghanem feels that Palestinian militants can be disarmed more easily wherever they are present outside of the camps, such as near the towns of Naame (south of Beirut) and Sultan Yaaqoub (in the Biqa'). Ghanem suggested that the LAF should

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move in and surround these bases in force, compelling the militants to hand in their weapons, though he warned that the GOL could not disarm Hizballah and the Palestinians at the same time.

FELTMAN